

# THE ART OF MASS EFFECT™



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THE ART OF

# MASS EFFECT™





## 01 HEROES AND VILLAINS

4



## 02 LIFE-FORMS

18



## 03 TRANSPORT

68



## 04 A GALAXY OF DETAILS

106



## 05 ALIEN WORLDS

130

It's not easy building a universe. In fact, we invested a good portion of Mass Effect's several hundred man-years of development into defining the galaxy of life-forms, technologies, and locations that would provide the setting for this epic videogame. As intimidating as that was, it was made even more difficult by the stunning level of detail that would be made possible by the coming generation of hardware and software. Art concepts would now have to consider complex material properties, subtleties in lighting and shadow, and details as fine as individual pores on an alien's skin. For the first time, a videogame had the potential to rival the visual quality and cinematic drama of a live-action motion picture. With that in mind, we set forth on a journey that would not only challenge the limits of our creativity, but also our ability to transform the fruits of our imagination into a believable reality.

The process began with more questions than answers. We asked ourselves some fundamental questions about what "space adventure" really meant to us. In an ideal space adventure, what would we want to do? Where would we want to go? What amazing things would we hope to see there? Our earliest ideas came from things that inspired us in our youth: the exploits of real-life astronauts, spectacular paintings that adorned science-fiction book covers, and the movies of the late 70s and early 80s that immersed us in thickly atmospheric visions of the future.

From that starting point, we began to resolve a clear vision for the art style of Mass Effect. It would be a seemingly idyllic future—a bright universe, with the darkest of secrets. The civilizations of the galaxy would enjoy architecture and vehicles of elegant beauty, making use of simple geometry: compass arcs intersecting straight lines to create shapes that seemed to result from engineering as much as from art. And we would carefully age and weather their surfaces to anchor them in a realistic setting.

Free of the limitations of conventional cinema, where alien costumes often need to fit over the form of a human actor, we explored the full range of possibilities for alien anatomy. But as wild as some of the ideas were, we knew that each of our alien characters had to be capable of projecting the human emotion that would give impact to their part of story. Therefore they would not only have to look plausible as living creatures, but they would need physical features and movements that would allow them to realistically express a range of emotions.

And to pull it all together in a unified visual style, we added a soft, film-like quality to the rendering of the game. As in real-life photography, we would use depth-of-field effects to focus on a character's face, against a softly blurred background. Light would bloom from brightly-lit edges, and a subtle vignetting effect would darken the corners of the image, as though the scene had been filmed with real cameras and projected in a theatre. Finally, a light film grain was introduced to lend a soft analog feel to an otherwise harsh digital image.

In the role of Director, it was my honor to work with a tremendously talented team of artists who spent several years realizing this challenging vision. The requirements of our storyline frequently offered a new aspect of the universe to design, and Art Director Derek Watts and I would discuss ideas for direction. In turn, Derek and his concept artists quickly produced a multitude of images that each visualized our thoughts in exciting new ways. Then, as a team of artists and writers, we would springboard off of great ideas and infuse them with new twists as we moved towards final designs. Once approved, the final concept would then be meticulously sculpted as a 3D model, painted with a complex layering of materials, and then brought to life through the most advanced programming and animation methods we had ever developed. Most satisfying of all, these complex art pieces ultimately came together to immerse players in a single picture: a living, breathing vision of the future.

The art in this book reveals how this process resulted in the imagery you see in the game, including the wealth of compelling artwork that represents the steps made along the way. We hope you enjoy it.

—Casey Hudson, Project Director, Mass Effect



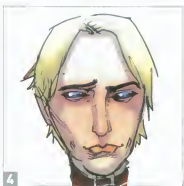


## HEROES AND VILLAINS

With an intense focus on capturing the human emotion of its powerful story, Mass Effect™ required a cast of digital actors of unprecedented realism. Much like the cast of a major motion picture, the detailed appearances of Mass Effect's digital actors would have to capture the very spirit of their characters. For humans, the conceiving stage led to the casting of real-life models that were scanned to create 3-D models of their characters' faces. Alien characters, however, had to be meticulously hand-sculpted by artists at BioWare®. In either case, these characters would ultimately go through a process to add dynamic wrinkles, eye movements, and facial expressions, turning them into beings that live and breathe inside a futuristic universe.

# 01





## MAIN HUMAN CHARACTERS

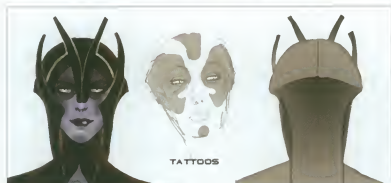
In early sketches of Ashley [1], Kaidan [2], Captain Anderson [3], and Joker [4], BioWare artists explored archetypal ideas about the character's appearances. Joker, the starship Normandy's confident pilot, was originally meant to look sickly, but he was ultimately given a more muscular build. Though these concepts were highly stylized, they gave each character an iconic look that would enable the casting of real-life human models.



#### EARLY PROMOTIONAL SHOTS OF COMMANDER SHEPARD

The first images of Commander Shepard put him in white armor, which didn't fully capture his character. The "N7" suit was designed to portray Shepard's experience more accurately. The final version, with its darker, weathered material represents Shepard's experience and gritty determination, while its scarlet stripe symbolizes human blood—something he would be willing to sacrifice, when needed.





### MATRIARCH BENEZIA

The Matriarch's appearance was designed to capture the beauty and mystical power of the asari, while bearing the dark and mysterious qualities that helped associate her with Saren.





## TALI'ZORAH NAR RAYYA AND LIARA

As the sole quarian in Mass Effect, Tali (top) embodies her species' nomadic spirit. Though this concept shows a glimpse of what her face might look like under her visor, her true appearance is never revealed. Liara's face (bottom) did not have a specific design, but rather it was based on original concepts for the asari.





## GARRUS

Numerous ideas for facial patterns were evaluated (top) before settling on Garrus' final appearance (bottom).





#### WREX

A fiery red pattern was chosen for Wrex's skull plate, creating a unique and menacing appearance. A deep scar cuts across his face, implying that he survived a near-fatal assault.





## SAREN

Initial concepts of Saren's costume relied on robes and cloaks to lend mystery to his appearance. As Saren's background as a rogue Spectre was developed, however, a more armored appearance was created, one appropriate for an elite human soldier.



## SAREN

A very early concept of Saren (top) and promotional images taken of his near-final design (bottom)



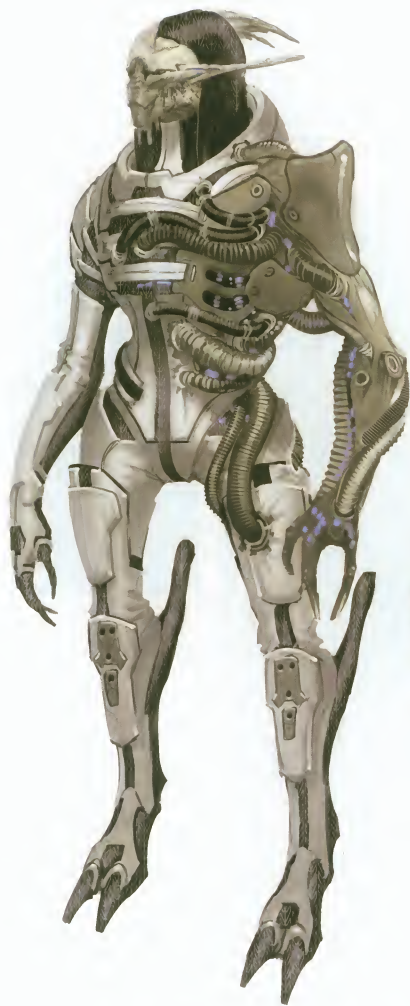




# SAREN

This painting was developed to help visualize Saren's personality and wardrobe ideas. In several early concepts, Saren carried a cane or sword, providing opportunities for a unique acting performance.





## SAREN

Final concepts for Saren and his monstrous form (opposite) symbolize his cooperation with synthetic life forms. A gelth arm was grafted onto his left side. With his organic flesh burned away, the full extent of Saren's mechanical implants is revealed.





## LIFE-FORMS

To add life to the worlds of Mass Effect, a galaxy of new creatures and aliens was required. To achieve a truly alien appearance for creatures and monsters, artists combined the features of earthly animals in strange combinations, creating unique new creatures with immediately recognizable traits. In addition to these basic life-forms, players would meet characters from advanced alien civilizations that would need to interact with the intelligence and emotion of a human being. Developing the anatomy and costuming of these aliens would require an extensive concepting process, as well as considerable reference to earthly cultures and creatures.

# 02









## ASARI

To capture a familiar element of science fiction "fantasy" fulfillment, one of the main species in *Mass Effect* was to be a race of beautiful "green alien girls." An extensive exploration of ideas was needed to make them appear exotic and alien while still retaining human qualities allowing them to be desirable as potential love interests.







## ASARI

Though they are able to wear clothing and armor meant for human females, special costumes were designed for the asari, ranging from the tight-fitting armor of the elite commandos to the alluring clothing of the asari Consorts.





## ASARI

In developing an alien species, it is as important to visualize personality and spirit as much as anatomical details. These paintings helped to define the strength and mystery behind the Asari.





## ELCOR

To create additional species to expand and diversify the populations of Mass Effect, BioWare's artists were free to explore countless ideas for weird and wonderful creatures. From this wealth of creativity, the elcor, volus, and hanar were chosen to become three distinctly different species.



# ELNOR

The stout and powerful appearance of this concept became a front-runner for the elcor, but its bipedal stance was considered too human.





## ELCOR

This painting (right) and its original sketch (above) cemented the design for the elcor. They also provided a definitive (and humorous) perspective on their personality.





## GETH

In the first story drafts, Saren's geth army was actually a bat-like species. But as Mass Effect's underlying theme of organics vs. machines emerged, the geth were rewritten as a synthetic lifeform.





## GETH

In contrast to the image of the classic metallic robot, the geth were designed to have a more lithe and sinewy appearance. One image (top left) appropriately captured this disconcerting approach, using rubbery tubing in place of veins and muscle striations.









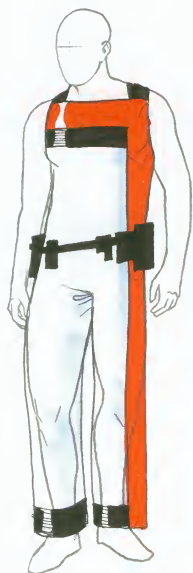
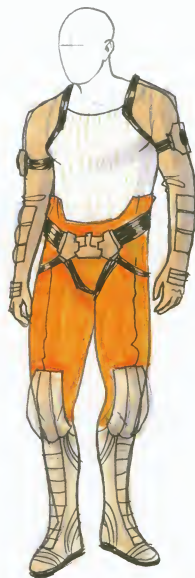
## GETH

Closing in on the final design, detailed paintings were made to establish material properties and other details that would help the 3-D artists create the geth, including the single blue “eye” that casts a horizontal lens flare.





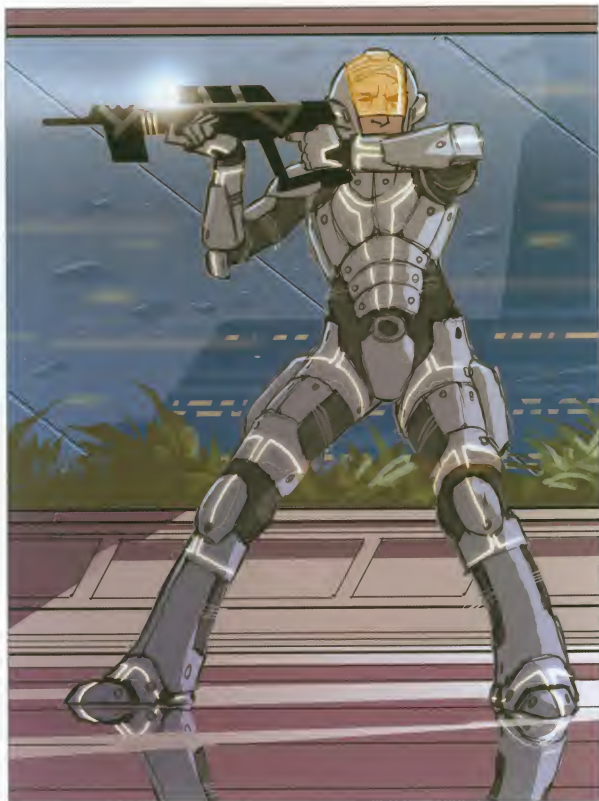




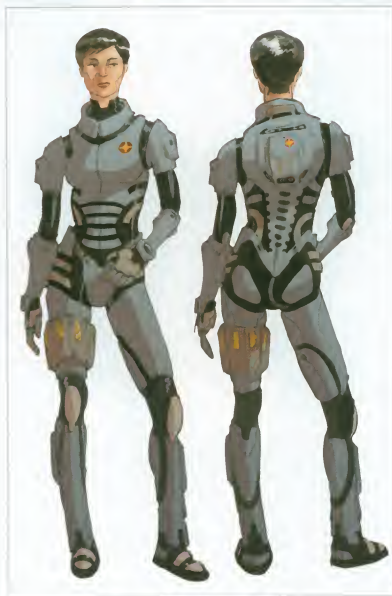


## HUMAN CLOTHING

The design of human clothing helped establish the sleek and clean future of the Mass Effect universe. Early concepts focused on the graphical shapes and colors that would clearly differentiate characters from one another, such as mechanics, doctors, and bar patrons.







#### HUMAN ARMOR

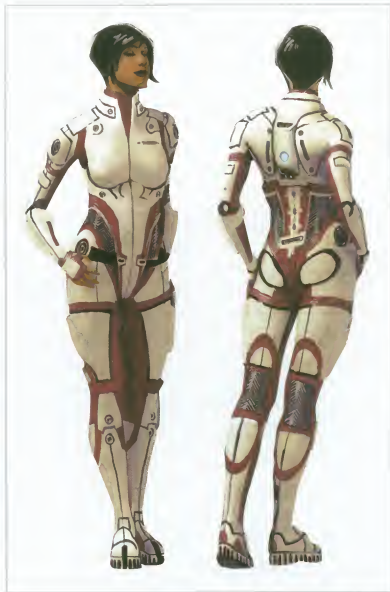
To create a unique and consistent style, all armor designs would be based on the same principles: the use of straight lines and circular arcs to create strong geometric shapes.

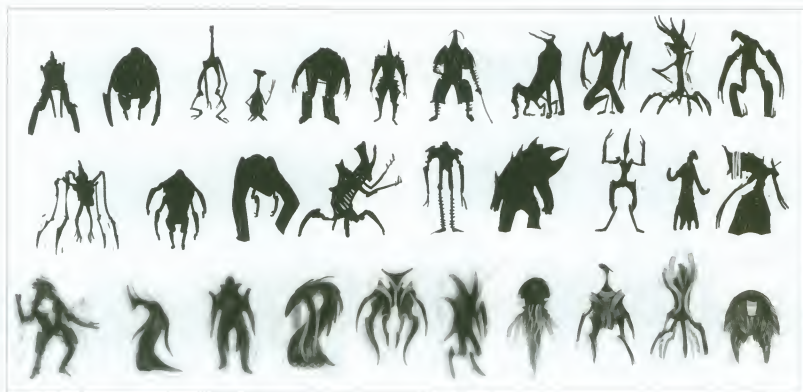




#### HUMAN ARMOR

The final design for standard human armor (opposite, in white) created a futuristic and form-fitting look while retaining a functional appearance that could be effective in combat. Other armors were required for unique characters, such as the hazmat suit (above and opposite, in red).





## HANAR

To quickly evaluate a wide range of ideas for alien anatomies, small silhouette concepts were produced. Though some of the spider-like shapes were compelling, they were too similar to some of the other creatures, such as the rachni. Instead, the jellyfish concept (opposite) represented a unique direction for an exotic species. Later concepts developed the hanar into a more slender, lighter-than-air creature.





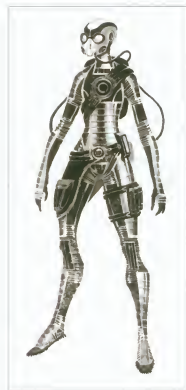
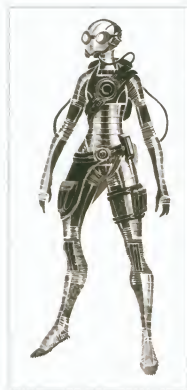


## KROGAN

Filling the role of the big, brutish species in the Mass Effect universe, the krogan incorporated reptilian features. The final concept (opposite, top left) brought their design somewhat closer to human proportions, allowing them to move and fight as traditional soldiers.



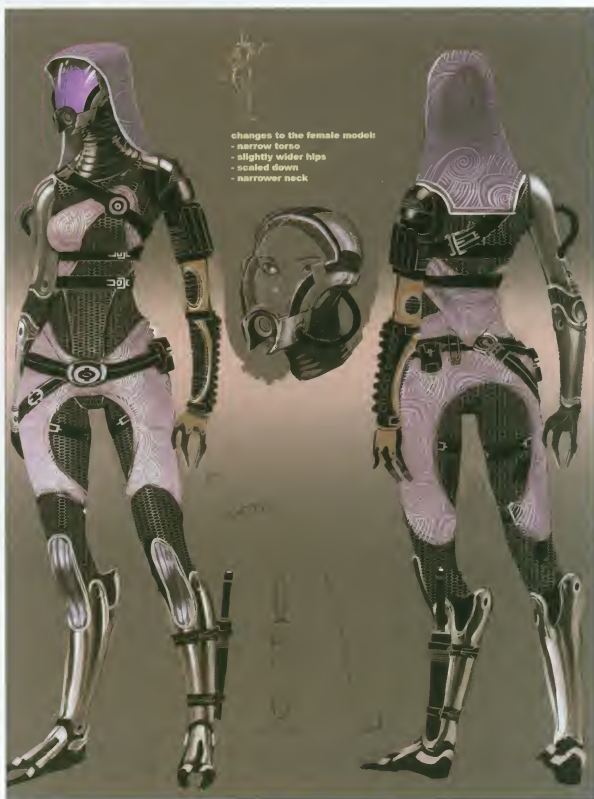


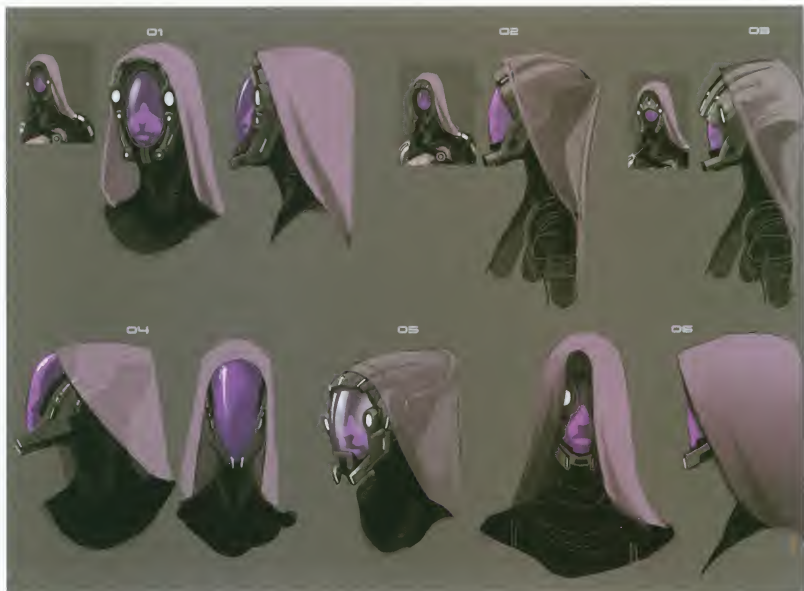




## QUARIANS

Creators of the geth, the quarians were overrun by their creations and forced to leave their homeworld. Their visual similarity with geth anatomy helps connect their history. Quarian clothing, seemingly pieced together from scraps, was designed to reflect their nomadic nature.



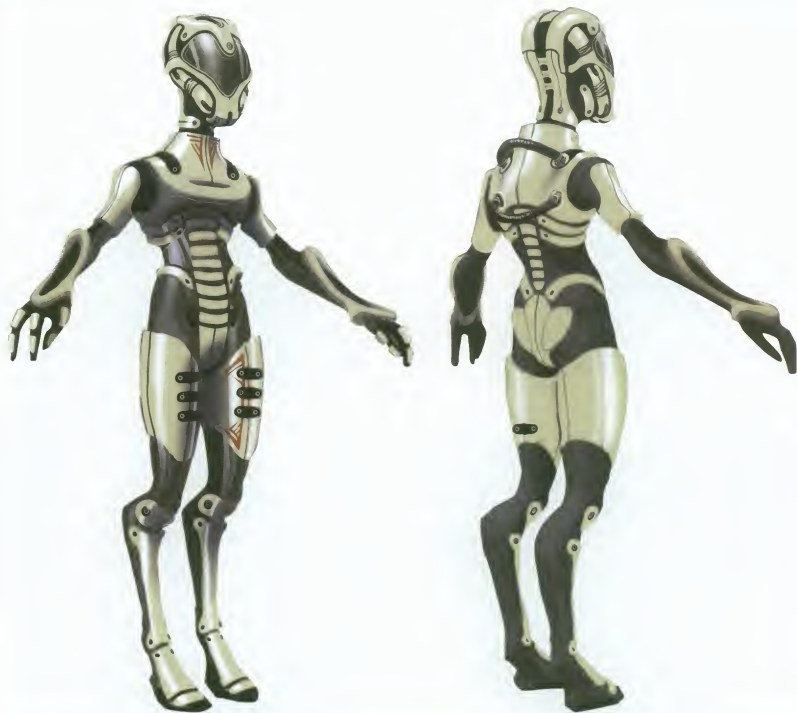


## QUARIANS

Tali represents the appearance of only one member of her species. What others might look like—and what they might look like under their visors—remains a mystery.







## SALARAINS

To create a very alien and intellectual look, the salarians were inspired by the wide-eyed, delicate appearance of salamanders. Their bodies and armor were designed to support these qualities by creating a unique profile.

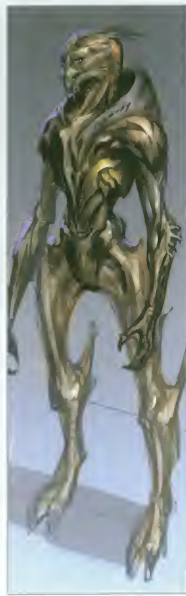
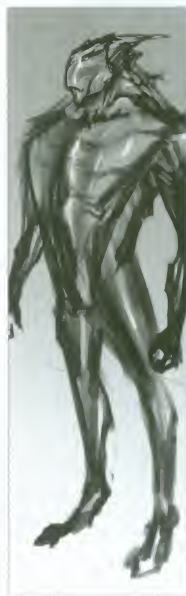






#### SALARIAN CLOTHING

For each species in *Mass Effect*, a range of clothing styles was required to create characters from various levels of society. The concept for the counselor robes (above) was approved as a final design, whereas many early concepts were never built (left).



MIRRORED  
ON CHEST



TURIAN GANG SYMBOL

REVERSE  
MIRRORED  
ON LEGS



## TURIAN

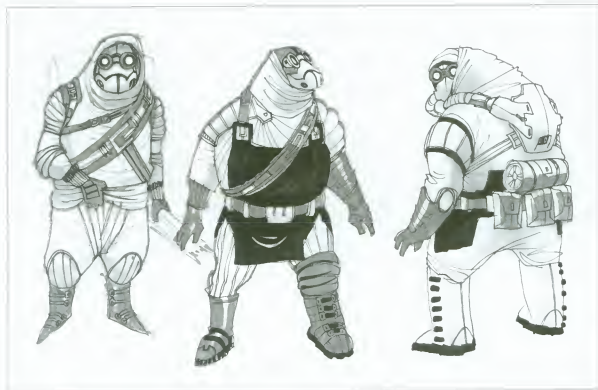
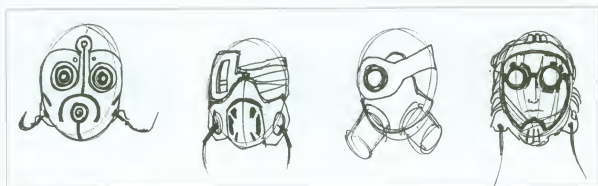
Knowing that *Mass Effect*'s villain would be a turian, artists gave this species features that would support his intimidating character. The bony face plates give turian characters a stern, hawk-like appearance, while the wiry body frame implies a potential for stealthy movement.



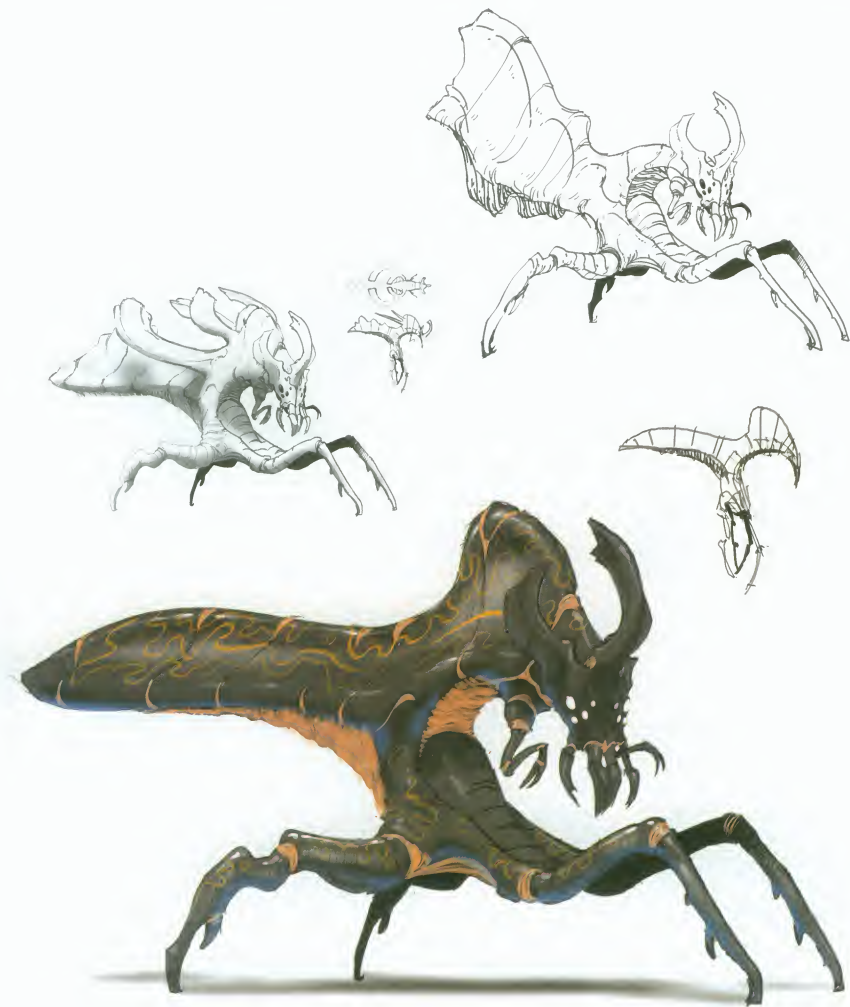


## VOLUS

Sometimes a design seems to have a life of its own. The volus began as a heavily-clothed character with a gas mask (below) that developed into this lovable and portly final design (opposite). This final drawing inspired artists and writers to transform the volus into a diminutive, comical species.







## RACHNI QUEEN

While the rachni would initially appear as mindless monsters, the rachni queen would be surprisingly intellectual, in addition to being physically intimidating. Though she would be nearly 50 feet long, her design was inspired by tiny beetles and insects.



## RACHNI

Early versions of the rachni showed a spider-like form with deadily jointed arms that could attack with a stabbing motion. These would later become whip-like appendages that could attack from a greater distance.



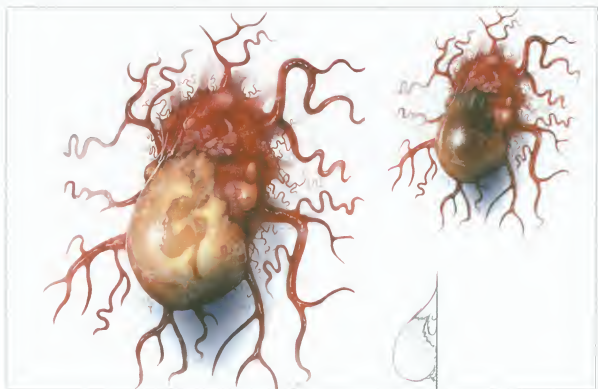


## RACHNI

As the final design of the rachni took shape, ideas for rachni eggs and hive entrances were developed to provide locations for rachni to emerge from.







#### THE THORIAN

Although the Thorian was originally written as a slug-like creature, its design transformed into a more grotesque and intimidating form.







## HARVESTERS

The harvester was meant to be a very large creature that could only be defeated with the use of the Mako, all-terrain combat vehicle. Although its final design, *Jopposne*, centered was built, it was never used.







## AMBIENT CREATURES

The Mass Effect universe is populated with a number of ambient creatures that give life to the environments. Gas bags (above, right) are lighter-than-air creatures that release poisonous fumes when "popped." Man-sized beetles (above, left) represent no danger but nonetheless, are a remarkable sight.



## VARREN

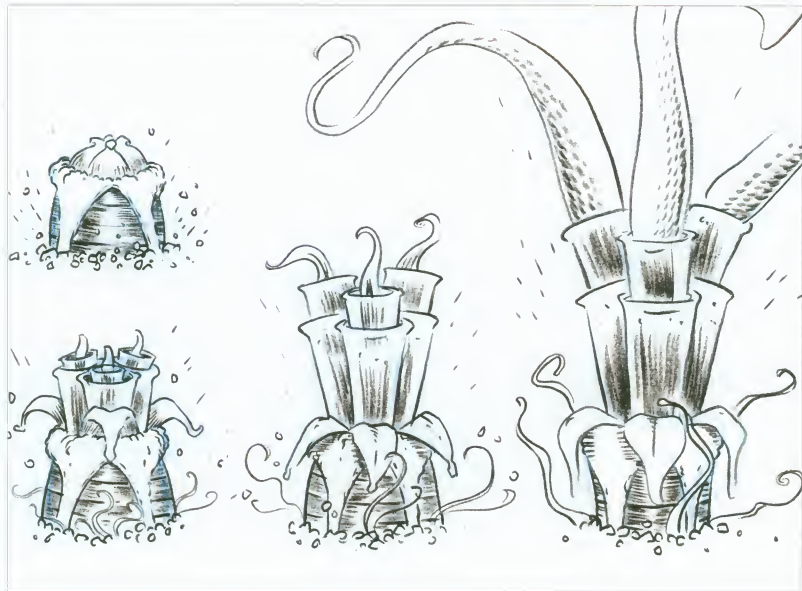
Creature designs in the Mass Effect universe employ a simple device to make them seem alien: an unnatural combination of familiar earth creatures. The varren are a perfect example of this, combining the body of a dog with the scaly skin and bulbous eyes of a deep-sea fish.





# **THRESHER MAW**

Possibly the largest creature in the Mass Effect universe, the thresher is able to burst from the soil without warning.



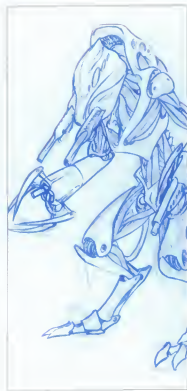
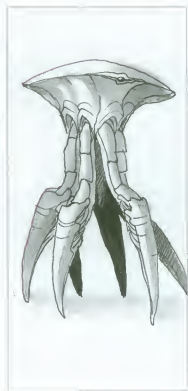


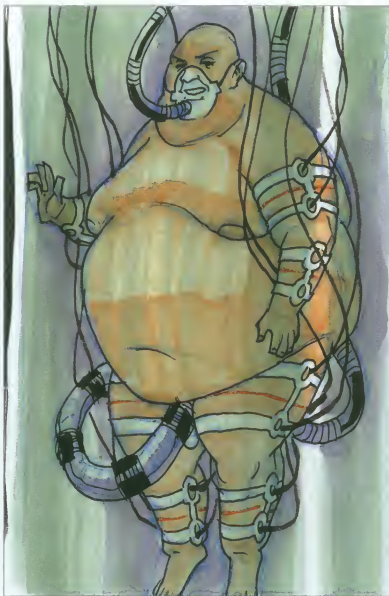


## KEEPERS

To achieve the appearance of a "gentle insect," the design of the keepers was based on the playing mantis, with whimsical details (a vest and tiny backpack) to make them seem sentient.







#### ADDITIONAL CONCEPTS

In the process of exploring ideas for creatures seen in *Mass Effect*, many excellent concepts were drawn but not built. A team favorite was the "space goat" (top, right).







## TRANSPORT

How would interstellar space travel actually work? This is one of the first questions that need to must be answered—at least in fictional terms—when creating a futuristic setting. The rules that govern space travel will determine where you can go, how long it takes, and ultimately, what kinds of stories can be told. In *Mass Effect*, a system of enormous antennae called mass relays allows ships to travel hundreds of light-years in a matter of moments. Though these gigantic relays were left behind by an ancient civilization, the ships that use them belong to a variety of fleets—including the Human Alliance. This created opportunities for artists to not only design an armada of starships, but to also give each fleet a unique visual style. The most important ship of them all, however, would be Commander Shepard's: the SSV *Normandy*. It would not only serve as an environment for players to explore and a backdrop for some of *Mass Effect*'s most dramatic moments, but it would almost need to be a character unto itself, playing the starring role in the game's most spectacular space battles.

03



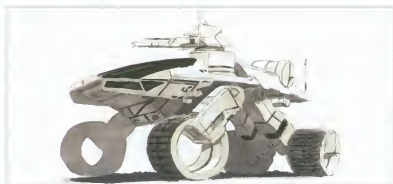
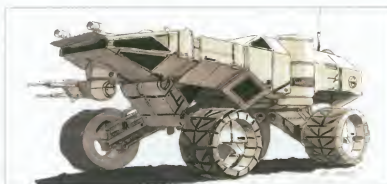
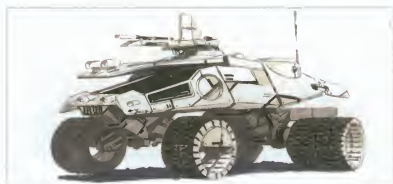
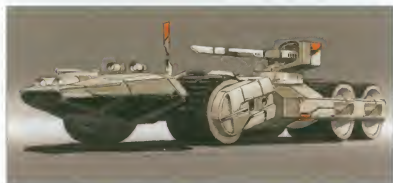
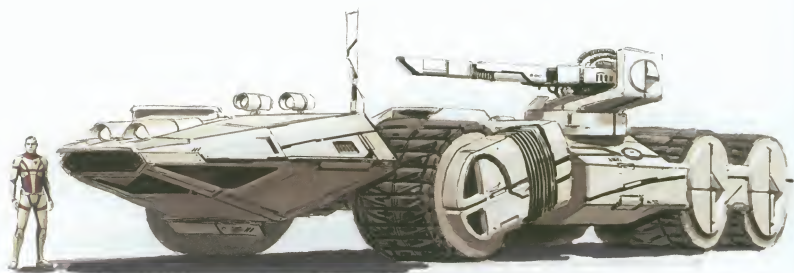
## THE MAKO

One early painting illustrated the adventurous spirit of exploring Uncharted Worlds in Mass Effect (above). It kicked off the formal design process for the Mako, the player's all-terrain combat vehicle. Knowing that players would have to traverse extremely rough terrain, the Mako needed large wheels and lots of ground clearance, while still having a sporty and futuristic look.





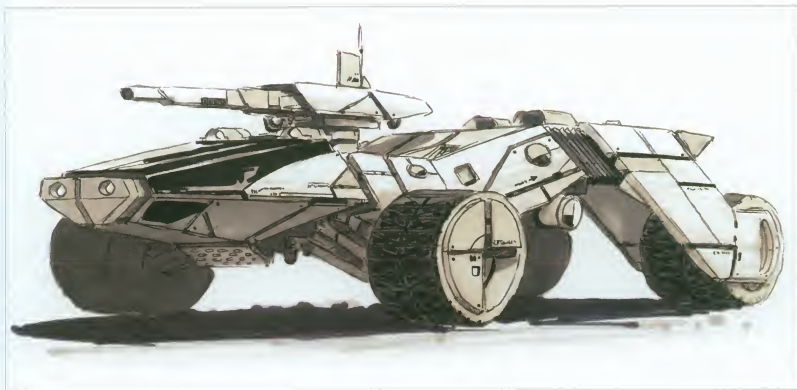




## THE MAKO

Many different designs were considered, including floating vehicles (opposite). Some of these concepts were actually built and tested to evaluate their capability in traversing rugged terrain. The vehicle from the concept shown above can be seen in *Mass Effect* as a stationary vehicle and was once the frontrunner for the Mako design.







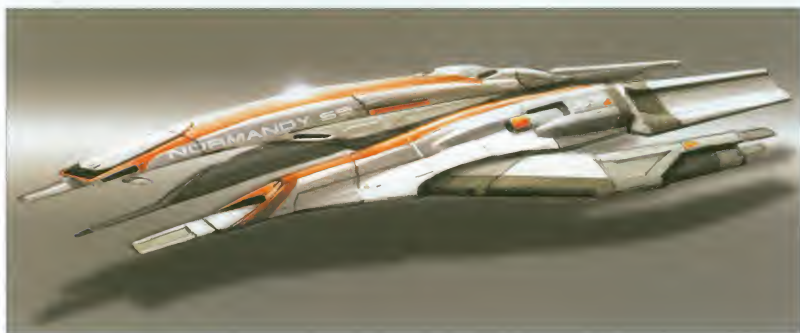
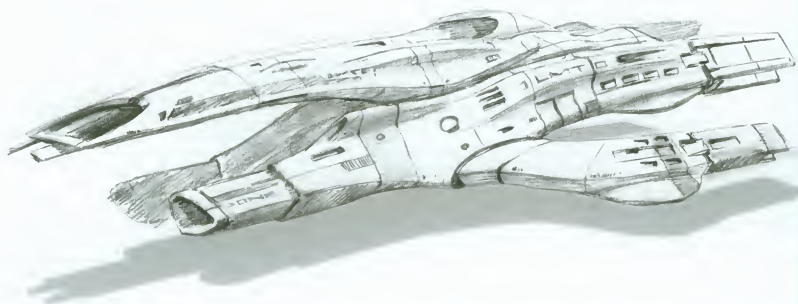
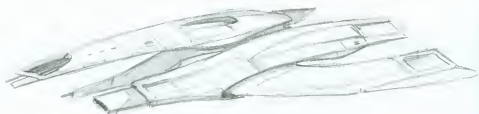
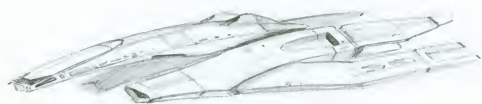


#### THE MAKO

The final concept for the Mako looked surprisingly sleek and futuristic for a vehicle with tremendous off-road ability. This resulted mainly from its wide wheelbase, and the pointed nose resembling the shark for which it is named.

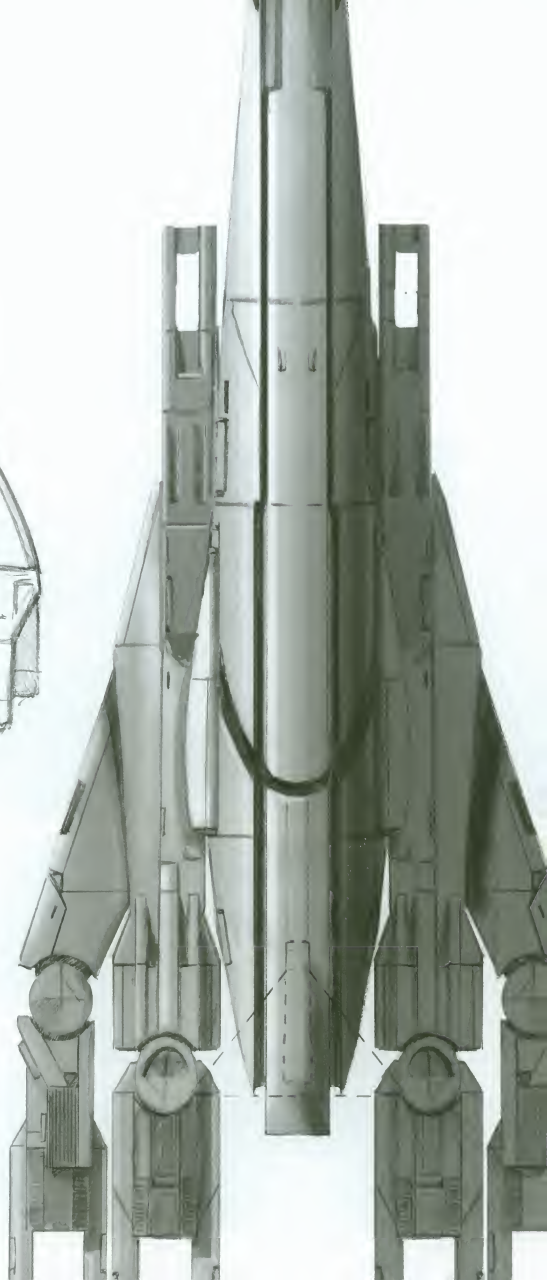
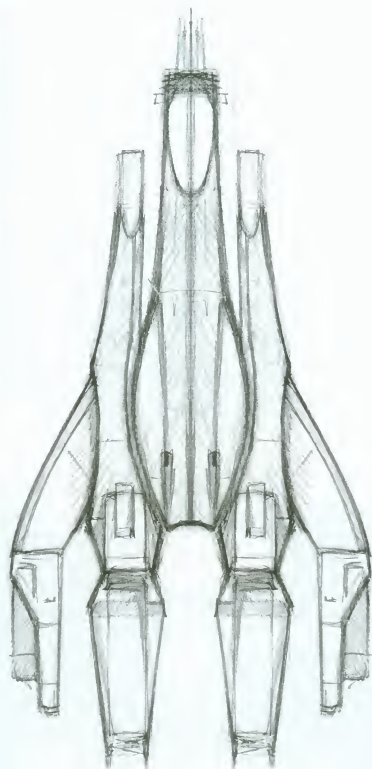




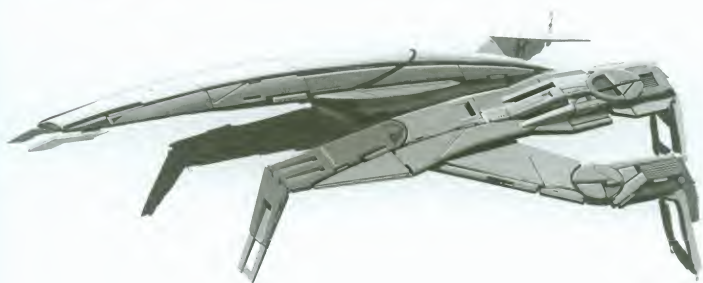
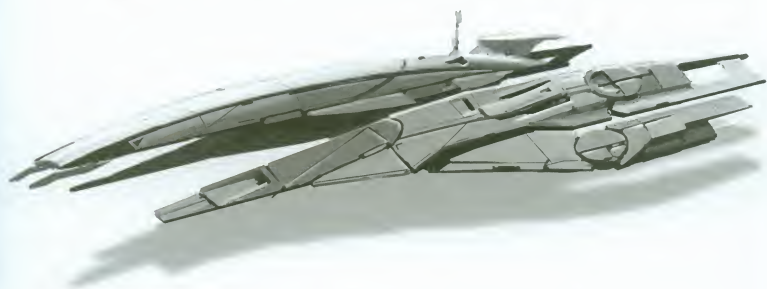
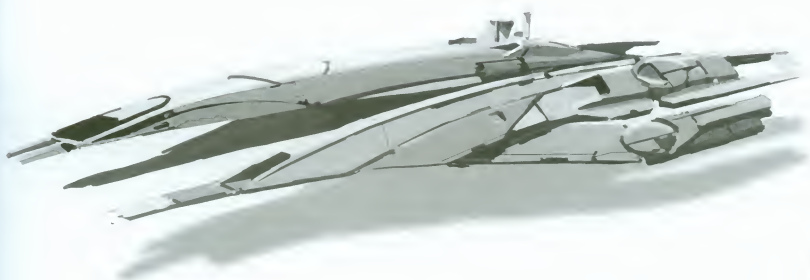


#### NORMANDY EXTERIOR

As the most advanced ship in the Human Alliance, the Normandy needed to look fast and stealthy. Early designs were inspired by the curved intakes and swept wings of the F-14 Tomcat fighter jet.



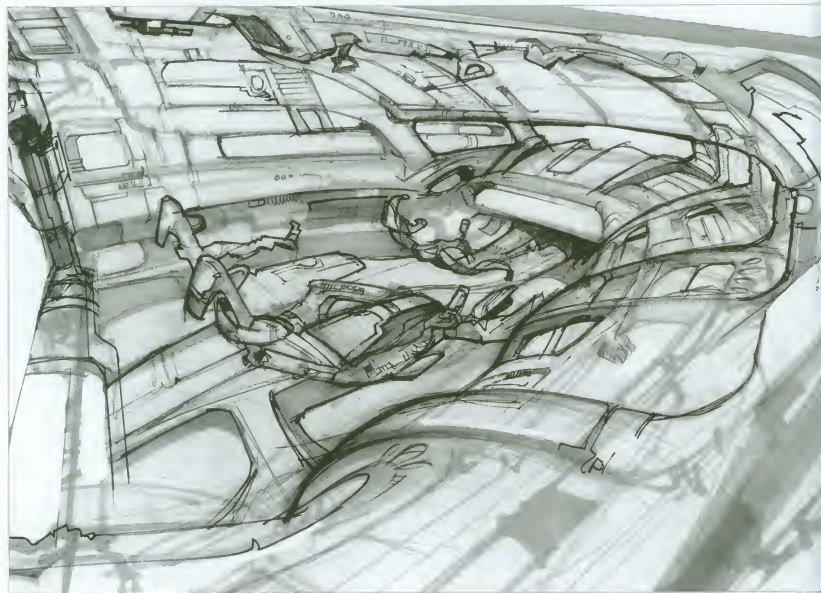
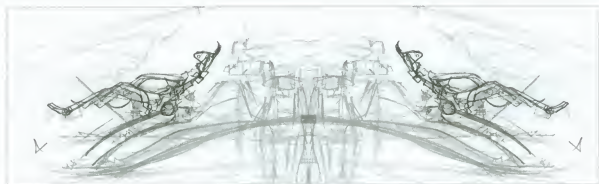


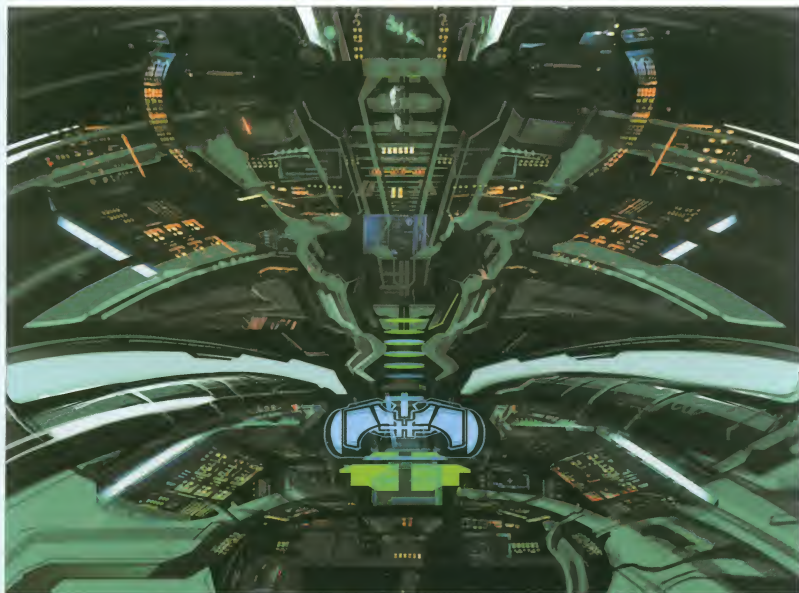


#### NORMANDY EXTERIOR

As the design was finalized, it was elongated even further to create a shape that looked capable of light-speed travel. But to ensure that it could come to a complete stop at a spaceport, vectored engine nozzles were added that also made it look more interesting when maneuvering.

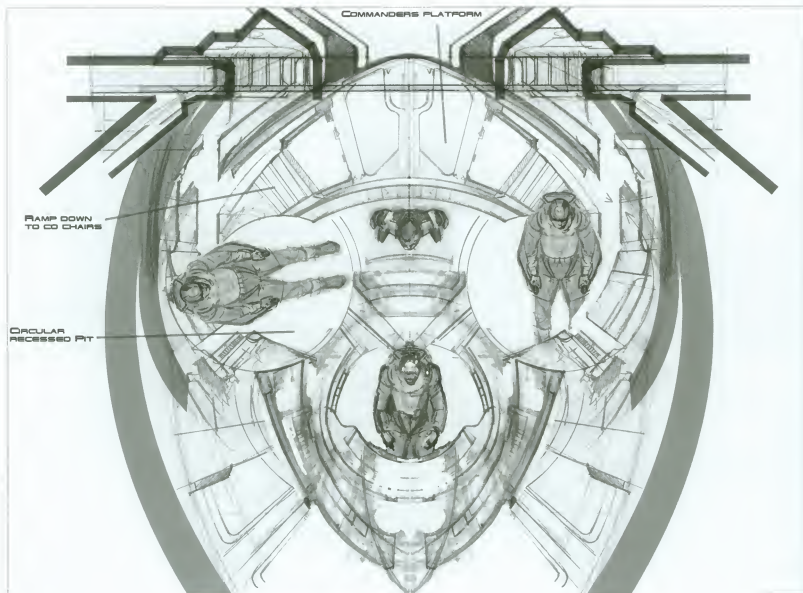






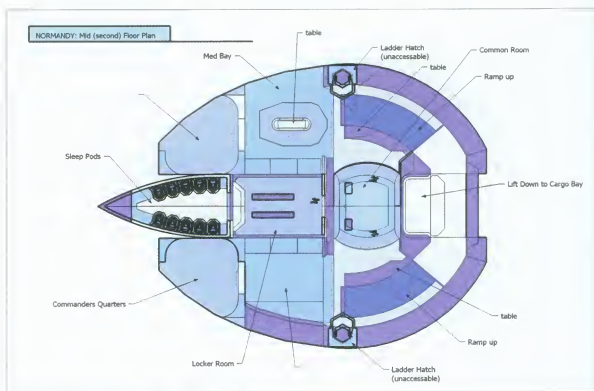
#### NORMANDY COCKPIT

The interior of the Normandy was meant to capture the purposeful, military atmosphere of a modern submarine. Crew would be seen working at bright computer screens in an otherwise dark environment. The cockpit would showcase this treatment as well as feature a narrow window to the world outside.

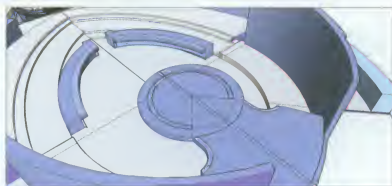
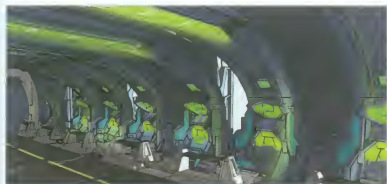


## NORMANDY INTERIOR

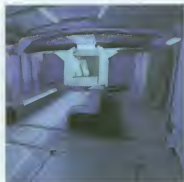
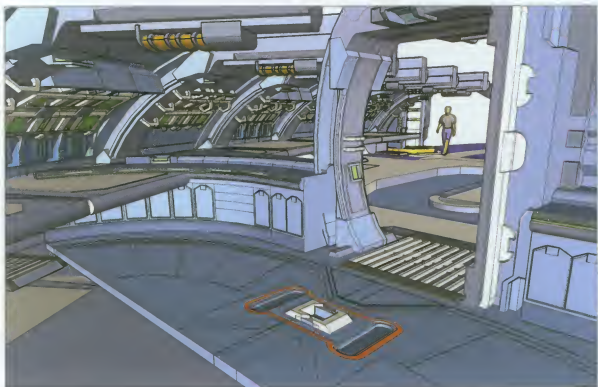
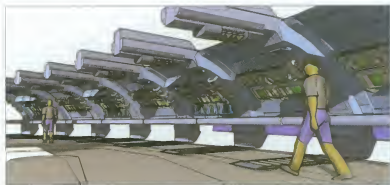
Several different approaches came together to visualize the Normandy's interior, such as marker renderings (above), rough 3-D models (opposite, top), and schematics (right).







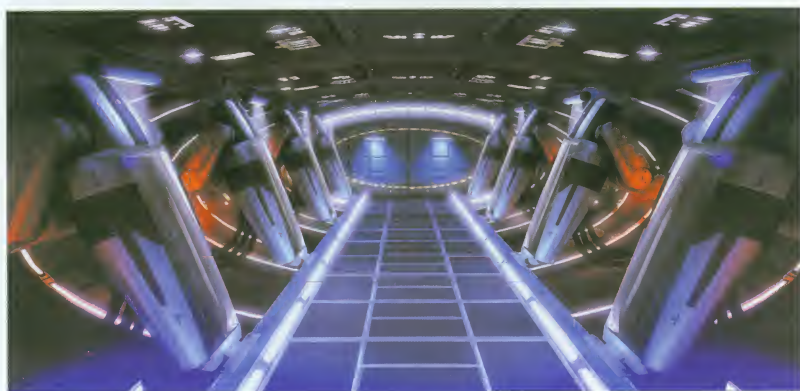
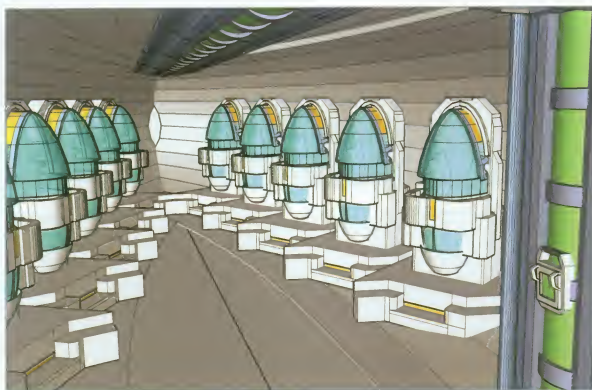
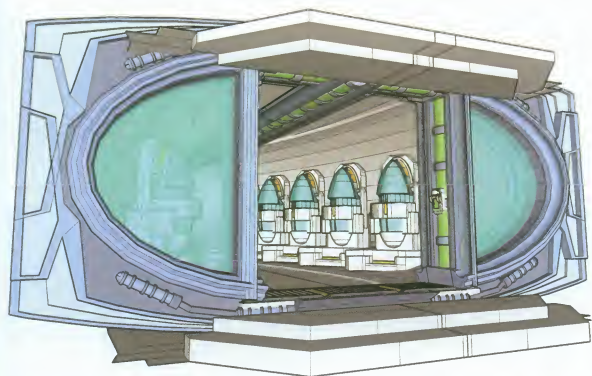


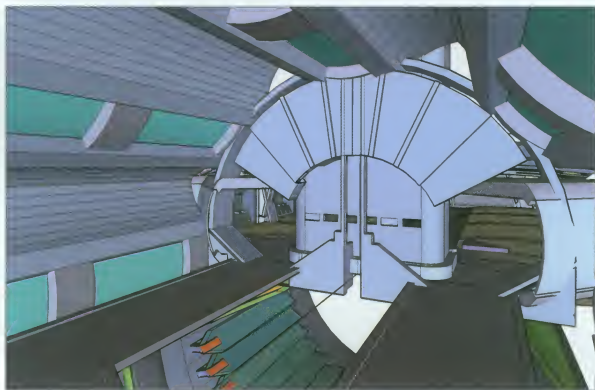
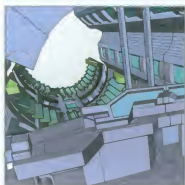
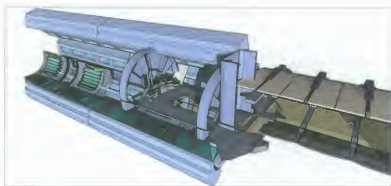


#### NORMANDY MID-DECK

The complex environment of a starship interior made it essential to draw upon 3-D sketching software to visualize such locations as the galley and sleep pod areas.



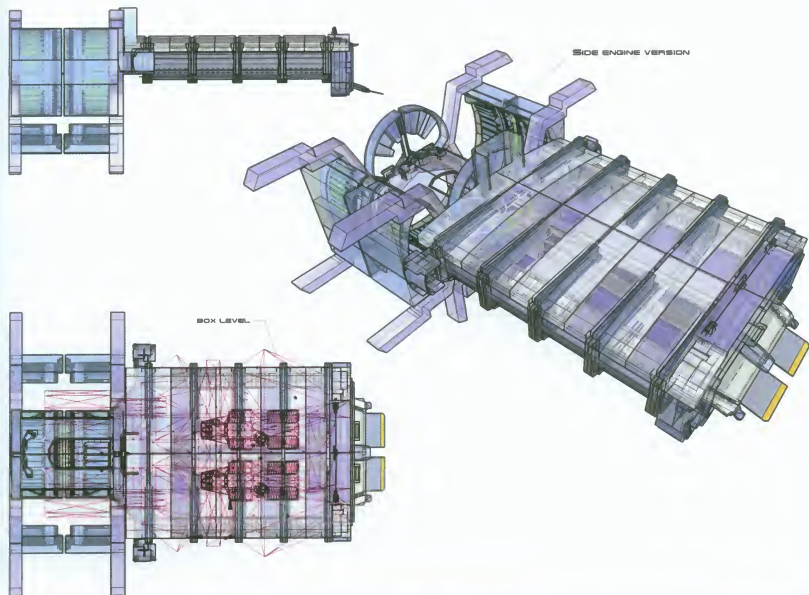




#### NORMANDY ENGINE ROOM

Though this area was relatively straightforward in visual terms, the enormous power of the engine was brought to life with large moving parts, impressive electrical effects, and thundering engine sounds.

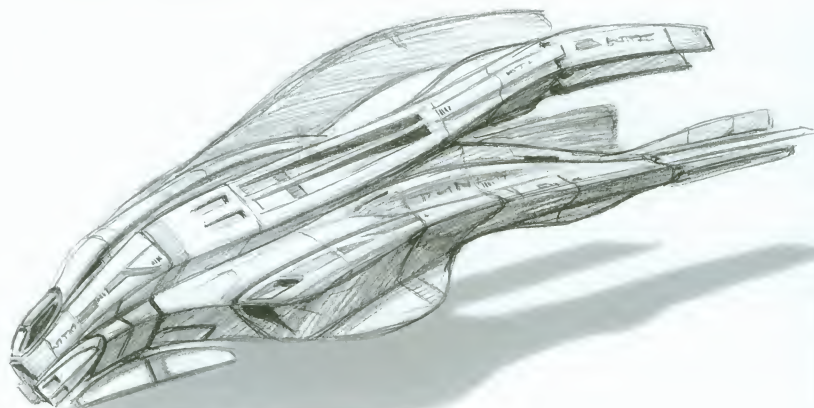
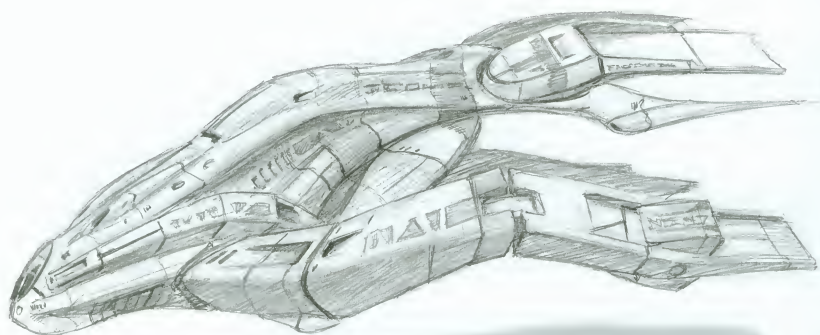




#### NORMANDY CARGO BAY

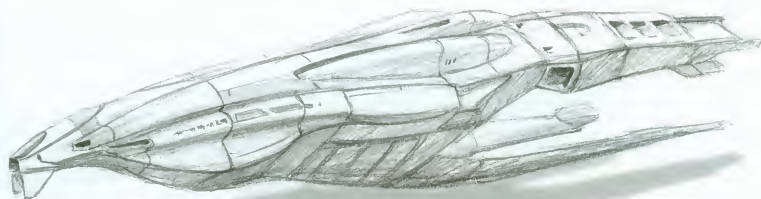
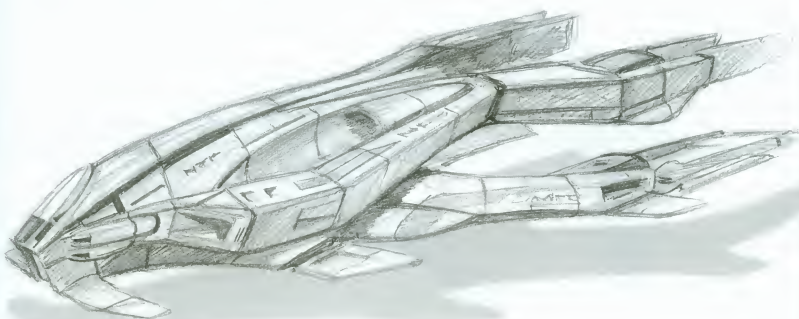
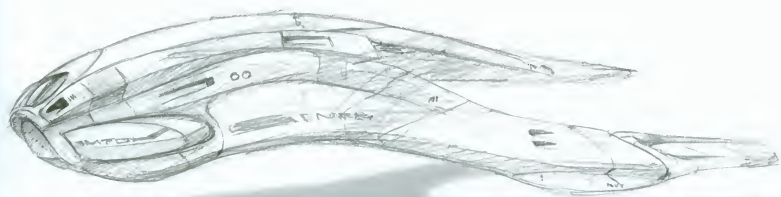
Using pools of saturated color, the lighting of the cargo bay reinforces the claustrophobic feeling of being inside the belly of a starship.





## HUMAN SHIPS

Each species' starship was given a unique look. Ships of the human fleet incorporated highly organic shapes so that they seem to swim through space. Originally drawn as early designs for the Normandy, they later became possibilities for human cargo ships.







## GETH SHIPS

To give them an intimidating appearance, geth ships were inspired by the tail-down posture a hornet takes when preparing to sting. Tiny “feelers” on the undersides of the ships enhance their insect-like profiles.

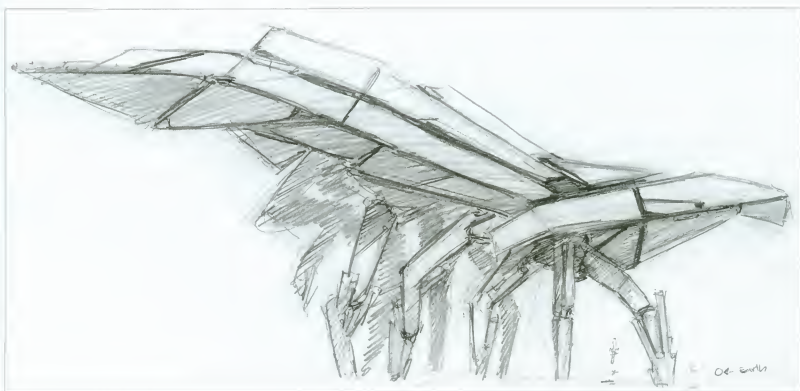
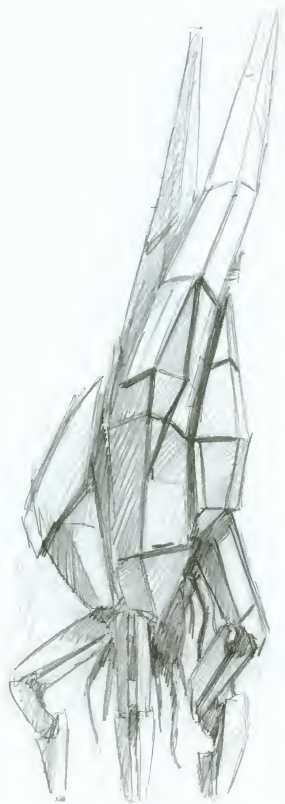


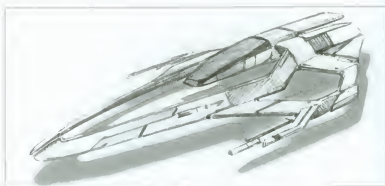
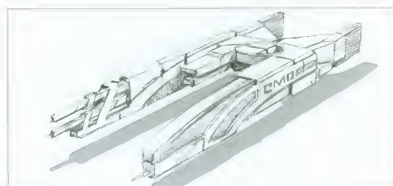
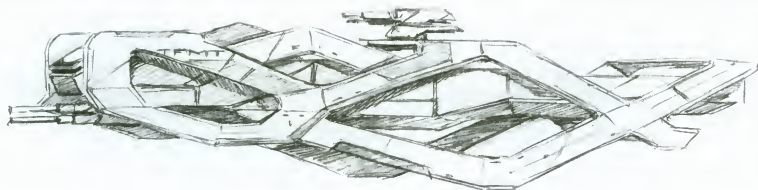
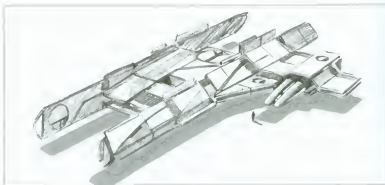
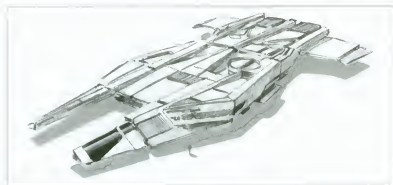




## SOVEREIGN

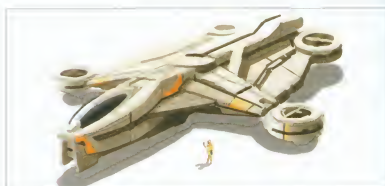
Standing more than a mile tall, *Sovereign* is easily the largest ship in *Mass Effect*. To enhance its size, it was imagined that its presence and power would disrupt the weather (bottom, left). Features reminiscent of an insect's anatomy were added to further tie it to the gelth and the other synthetic species in *Mass Effect*.





## HUMAN SHIPS

These additional ship designs show some of the alternate ideas for the starship Normandy, as well as possibilities for cargo ships and fighters.

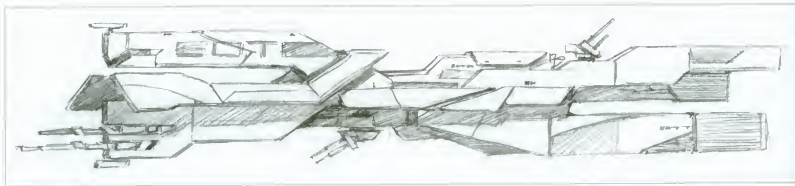




#### HUMAN SHIPS

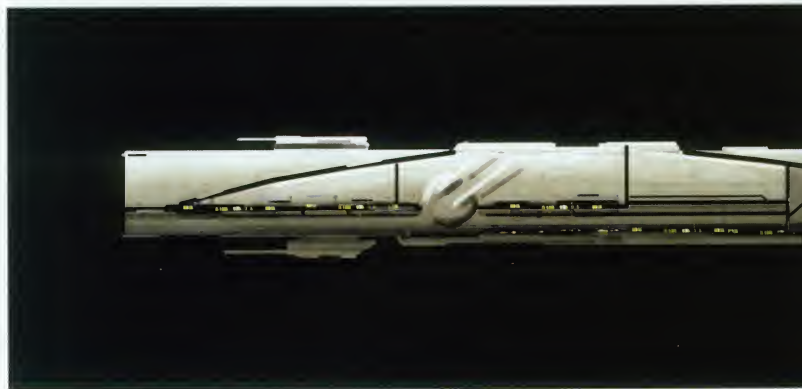
Though these drawings are shown at the same size, they represent ideas for a huge destroyer (top), a one-man fighter (middle), and a heavy cruiser (bottom).

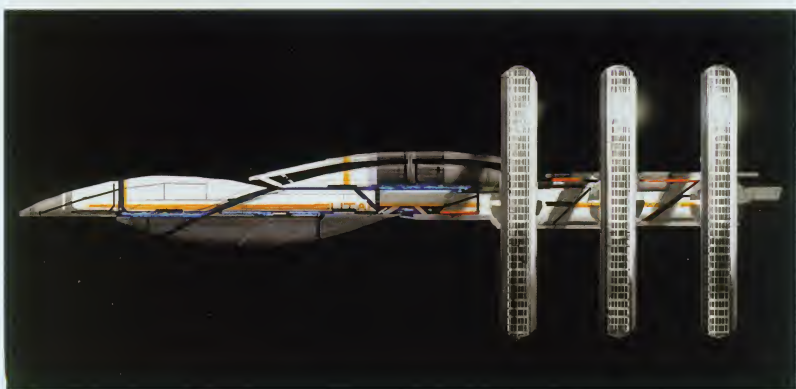


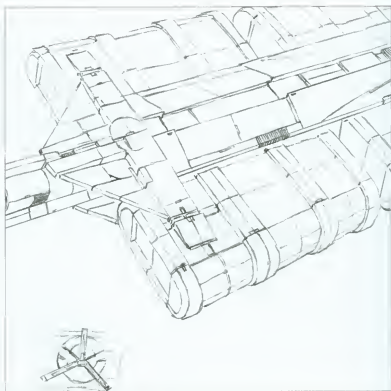
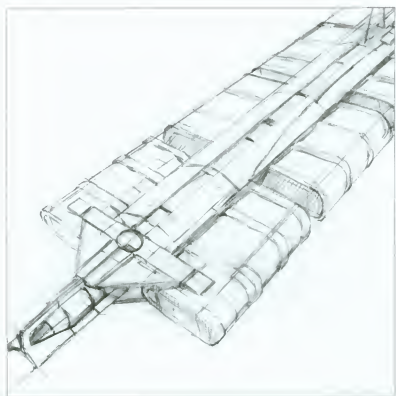


## HUMAN SHIPS

At one point in the concepting process, human ships were heavily geometrical. These freighter designs incorporated harsh boxy lines and long circular arcs. Even the early fighter design (below) was primarily composed of straight lines.









## FREIGHTERS

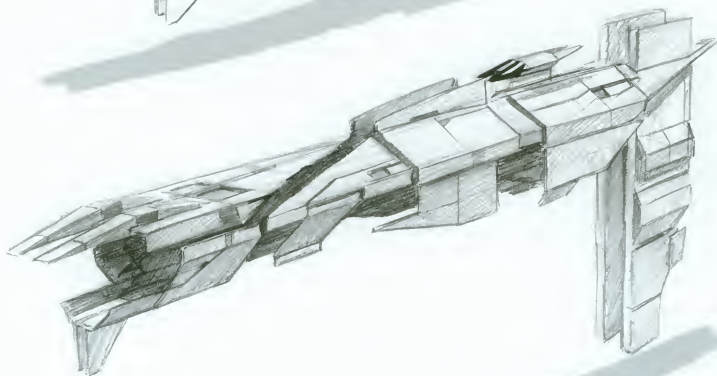
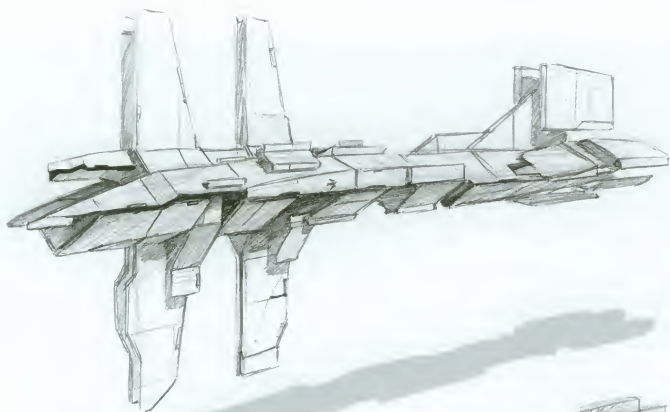
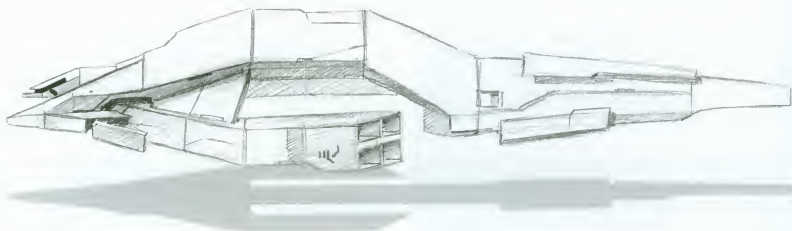
These bare-bones cargo ships can be found throughout the galaxy. With a simple spine holding together a series of reusable containers, the designs are obviously based more on economy than performance or aesthetics.

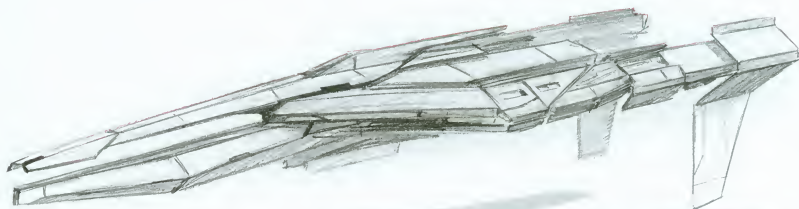
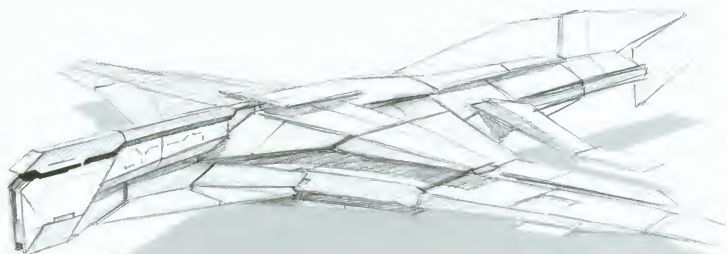


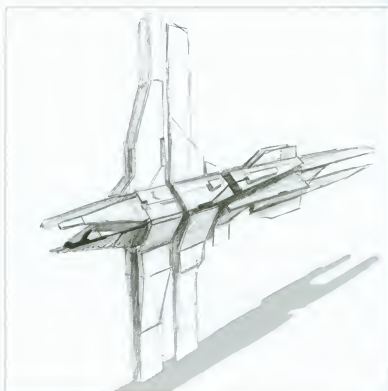
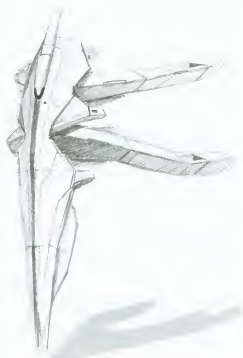


## TURIAN SHIPS

Turian ships incorporated layers of plates to roughly symbolize the feathered appearance of the turians themselves.

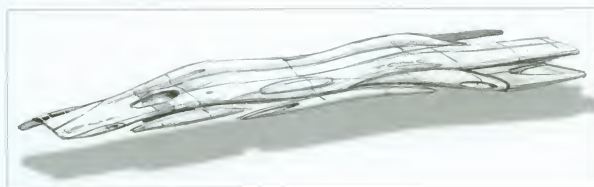
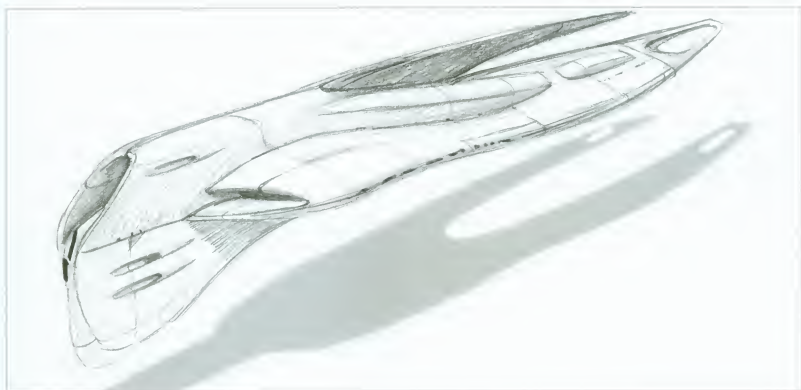
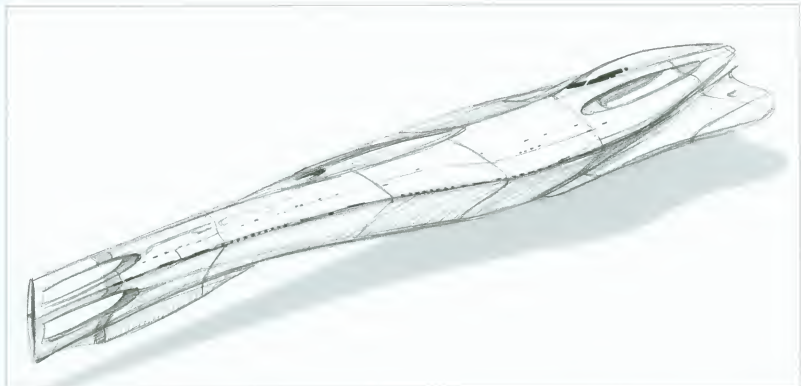






TURIAN SHIPS





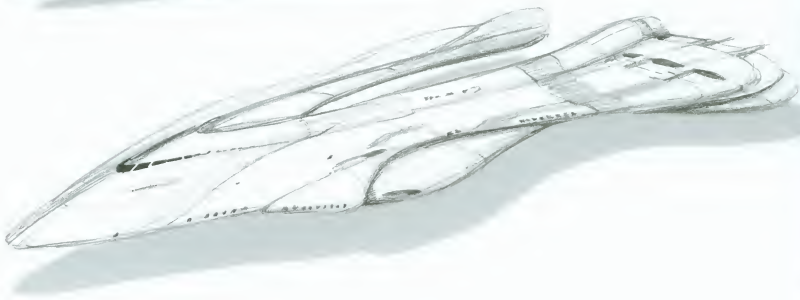
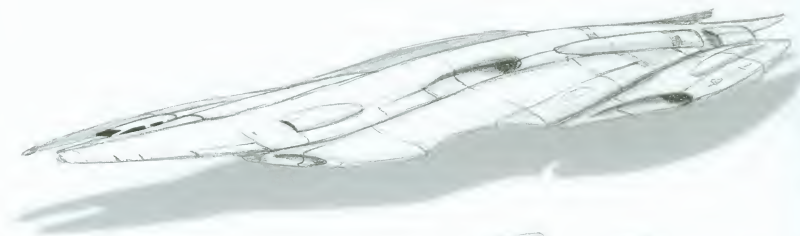
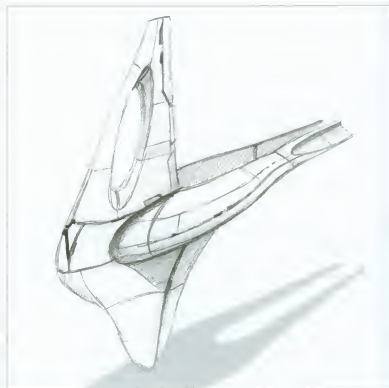
#### SALARIAN SHIPS

In a reference to the salarians' salamander-like appearance, the smooth, rounded appearance of the salarians ships makes them look as much like ocean-going vessels as starships.





SALARIAN SHIPS





#### THE DESTINY'S ASCENSION

Built by the asari, the Ascension was one of the biggest starships in Mass Effect. But the Citadel and mass relays were large enough to make even ships of this size seem tiny.